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Jeffrey Barlow
Pacific University

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Upon the Importance (and Dangers) of Playing Video Games

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Upon the Importance (and Dangers) of Playing Video Games

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By **Jeffrey Barlow** <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

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.01. **INTRODUCTION: THE EDITOR CONFESSES** ([return to index](#))

We chose the above very authoritative title for this editorial to show that we are quite serious about a rather mundane topic. In fact, this entire issue is largely devoted to the topic of video gaming, a circumstance that requires some explanation. We begin with a confession, a useful start to any personal piece of writing such as an editorial, even one produced at such a serious institution as the Berglund Center for Internet Studies. Here it is: I have played computer games for a number of years.

My decline probably began while, as a child, watching far older kids—some as old as fifteen—mastering the mysteries of pinball machines in the local diner. How did they know just when to bump those intimidating electronic monstrosities and what was the connection between their scores and the packets of cigarettes surreptitiously doled out by the proprietor from under the counter? I learned later that, in fact, those machines were the forerunner of early arcade-style video games such as Pong. [1]

Later, in college, I met a classmate who was the son of a crusading local newspaper editor who had taken on the reputed kingpin of a region-wide mob that controlled the placement of such machines, as well as of the quite illegal slots that were nonetheless to be found in many bars and social clubs. My classmate's father eventually disappeared, or probably more accurately, was disappeared, when he continued to be a nuisance. The reputed kingpin recently retired, wealthy and influential, having never to my knowledge served one day in jail. But back to my own decline and fall...

As I acquired a computer somewhat later, I decided that I needed to round out my education by playing at least one video game. While living and working in China, complete with a 64K Kaypro and a voltage regulator larger than it was, and knowing little about the possibilities, I began with such games as I had at hand. Possibly because there was little else to do besides work, China at that time being somewhat deficient in entertainments other than eating, I spent hours and hours playing "Zork" a very clunky (by today's standards) adventure game in which I wandered about a sort of magic realm searching for something or other by "talking" to turtles and inanimate objects.

As the Internet did not yet exist, I was denied that most valuable of resources for the contemporary gamer: game sites with advice and even, I admit it, lists of handy "cheat codes". As a result I was almost continually lost in the mythical realm and I became bored fairly quickly with the turtle's limited vocabulary ("Walk north."). But I could see that there was a great deal of potential for entertainment in such games, and for avoiding work, whether it was learning Chinese or writing editorials.

As I moved beyond that first machine and got a faster one with more memory and better graphics (the game player's ever receding goal) I discovered a wide range of new titles. As an historian, I was initially attracted to such historical scenarios as the Battle of Waterloo. Here the attraction became actually winning the battle while playing the English side. And I never did; I suspect that the playing fields of Eton provided better joysticks than I had available, or Napoleon was a bit slower to regroup than the game engine.

Then my students at the Matsushita Center for Electronic Learning introduced me to a game called "Myth" which encouraged me to go from identifying with the Iron Duke at Waterloo to ordering about a pack of slobbering dwarfs carrying bombs and satchel charges noisily trying to vaporize flying skeletal thingies before they could spear my guys. Playing totally through the 20 or so levels of Myth confirmed for me that this was a startling waste of time. Just to be sure, however, I played my way through Myth II and III. (Microsoft, when is IV coming out, anyway? I knew that your purchase of the original developers at Bungie Corp boded ill...) [2]

Next it was the "Civilization" series [3] , which had actual redeeming social value and is used in a number of classrooms to teach the importance of good economic planning before invading one's neighbors. And then I played its Microsoft competitor, "Age of Empires". Next came various "first person shooters" (meaning that you play a character that shoots enemies, whom you usually see over a gun sight). Here I found that my intellectual curiosity was rapidly

overtaken by a primal desire to get a better virtual weapon so that I could totally freaking vaporize my virtual enemies.

I had come, in short, from experimenting with various possible historical scenarios [4] in an attempt to determine precisely how it was that the Duke of Wellington could possibly have pulled off that victory at Waterloo to a raging lust to shoot whatever was around the next corner, preferably in an extremely messy manner (Whoa! Flying heads, cool!). Most recently this downward spiral has led me to Microsoft's World War II series of first-person shooters "Medal of Honor." [5]

In an effort to capitalize upon my leisure time activities, or possibly to rationalize wasting so much time, a bit as if Tommy Chong referenced Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* [6] before disappearing for his nine month's stretch, I have thought a lot about gaming, and there is an increasing amount to read about it as well. I turn now to some of the possible dangers of gaming.

.02. **DANGERS OF GAMING: ADDICTION?** ([return to index](#))

It seems to me that there are indeed, many possible downsides to game playing. One of them is the very real question of addiction. I will leave it to specialists to determine the boundary between actual physical or psychological addictions and avoiding activities that are less pleasurable than blowing up flying skeletal things. I am inclined to think that as I get bored rather quickly with most games, I am probably not truly addicted (or am I just continually looking for a better fix??). But I would worry if one of my children seemed to be spending inordinate amounts of time playing.

Part of the danger here, if danger it is, is that the games can be played online and one soon develops a circle of other habitués who will play with one at any hour. In both China and Korea, these games are often played online but in close proximity to one's friends. My daughter, playing in Internet Cafes in China in the summer of 2001, often found herself amidst screaming crowds of classmates yelling at each other online and across the game room as well. At any given time, hundreds of thousands of Koreans are playing online. The Korean access to broadband far outstrips that of the United States. [7]

In the United States, an increasingly important leisure activity is what is called a "LAN party." One gamer acts as the host, providing the broadband connection and possibly the host machine, while others bring their own machines and hook into the host's local area network (LAN). The group then eats and plays their way through the entire evening. This seems to be largely a male activity, but there are certainly plenty of "Game Gurls" too. [8]

But if we are to consider computer gaming possibly addictive, it is fairly obvious that the very commanding online versions are particularly so. The ultimate addict here surely must be Mr. Kim, the jobless Korean man who died after playing such games for eighty-six straight hours. [9]

.03. **GAMING AND GAMBLING** ([return to index](#))

If the issue of on-line role-playing games is complex, that of actual Internet gambling, also a form of video gaming, is far more so. A reliable figure of the amounts wagered annually seems impossible to find, but one such estimate is two billion dollars. [10] Moreover, the exact legal status of such gambling is also evasive. Some claim it to be an unregulated corner of the Internet, others that it is illegal under existing law. [11] For some offshore havens, such as Antigua and Barbuda, hosting gambling operations have become major sources of income and employment. Attempts to regulate such gaming from any one country, moreover, run into all the issues facing international electronic transactions in general, including World Trade Organization agreements. [12]

Is on-line gaming/gambling a danger? Clearly it is at least as dangerous as other sorts of gambling, perhaps more so. [13] In the United States in general and in many states in particular, gambling is the most regulated of legal industries. Bricks-and-mortar casinos are even required to screen out problem gamblers. But it is also, even a cursory WWW search will show, an enormous online industry with many sites dedicated to its pursuits.

And if casino gambling is difficult to regulate, proper control over online versions is going to be elusive indeed. And for me, of course, the image of my college classmate's lost father suggests that the industry, like every other form of gambling, holds many possibilities for violence and tragedy.

.04. **GAMING AND VIOLENCE** ([return to index](#))

This is probably the oldest charge launched against video gaming: that it desensitizes or possibly even conditions or inclines the gamer to violence. [14] It was charged in many quarters that violent games, particularly "Doom", contributed to the first several of the high school massacres that we now very nearly take for granted. [15] As this argument has been raging for decades now with regard to violence and television, it seems unlikely that we will solve it here.

In addition to their violence, some of the games are also potentially very unsavory, and their moral values often, to say the least, murky. It seems inevitable that there will be huge future online games in which numerous players rape and pillage their way across graphic landscapes. The public outcry over such games surely will make the debate over the possible connection between "Doom" and high school shootings a mild and thoughtful one.

My own opinion, based on my own subjective response after hours of gaming, is that it makes me nervous and edgy. I sometimes have trouble sleeping, and I do believe that the first-person shooter games desensitize me to violence. Others, of course, will doubtless respond very differently. Many of my friends claim, as do many studies, that gaming, even violent gaming, is a healthy outlet that may well lessen the penchant for violence in other circumstances. This leads us to turn to the advantages of video gaming:

.05. **ADVANTAGES OF GAMING: TRAINING** ([return to index](#))

It is fairly obvious, particularly to any teacher who uses gaming activity in classes, that students learn much more quickly in a gaming environment. This is true for a wide variety of subjects, but particularly for somatic skills. One approach used gaming environments to teach biofeedback techniques to medical patients with apparent success, according to NASA. [16]

The American military has been using war gaming and simulations in their own training for some time, a development that seems to be rapidly accelerating. The new "battlespace", a highly electronic one, and new forms of warfare have revealed the importance of war gaming or simulations.

The computer game is to contemporary and future forms of war as was the automobile to World War II. That war demonstrated that a soldier already familiar with the automobile had little trouble moving up to large trucks, tanks, and even airplanes. As Michael Macedonia, chief scientist at the Army's Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training and Instrumentation said, "Every kid figures out the controls pretty fast." [17]

And if it is true that video gaming desensitizes one to violence, or actually increases a propensity for it, then this is another advantage from the military perspective, whether that of an instructor trying to quickly teach such skills or a novice soldier trying to master them before the stakes become life and death ones.

One advantage of video gaming, which I myself have noticed, is that one learns a certain way of "seeing" in the gaming environment that may be useful in other environments. There is some research suggesting that gaming increases visual skills of a particular sort. One such study reported: "Video game playing enhances the capacity of visual attention and its spatial distribution..." [18] This seems sensible to me, and is a result I have seen in other forms of activities such as motorcycling and martial arts, two of my hobbies in an earlier life. In both activities, like in video gaming, it was very important to screen out "noise" or irrelevant visual cues from ones with potential impact. Whether increasing this skill was worth my taking the time to play Myth I, II, and III all the way through is a judgment I will not make at this time. But doubtless there are many situations in which such skills could be desirable.

.06. **GAMING AND EDUCATION** ([return to index](#))

Just as gaming is useful in teaching somatic skills, it is equally useful in teaching thinking and analysis. Gaming environments are increasingly being used for a variety of content. [19] Such projects are being undertaken at a number of universities, and gaming procedures or metaphors are increasingly common in the classroom. It is probable that this will be an increasingly important aspect of education and that however skeptical many educators may be, they will find themselves taking more and more advantage of such means to impart information or to practice applying it.

In addition, I have learned a great deal about teaching and training from the manner in which difficult skills can be successively taught within a gaming environment. One of our most successful (and well funded) educational activities, the Buddhist Palace, [20] was consciously created as a result of what we had learned about gaming environments while playing Myth.

.07. **GAMING AND PROFIT** ([return to index](#))

As noted above, video games are already a huge business. Their future seems to be almost an unlimited one, particularly as broadband access spreads and more players become accustomed to online gaming.

In the United States, an increasingly important leisure activity is what is called a "LAN party." One gamer acts as the host, providing the broadband connection and possibly the host machine, while others bring their own machines and hook into the host's local area network (LAN). The group then eats and plays their way through the entire evening. This seems to be largely a male activity, but there are certainly plenty of "Game Gurls" too. [21]

Some on-line games are of startling size and complexity. One multi-player on-line role-playing game, "Everquest," has 500,000 active players with subscriptions (at 12.95 per month), of whom 80,000 are on line at any given moment. This game requires 120 on line experts at Sony, working in shifts of fifty on line 24-7 to support it. [22]

Everquest began rather quietly and grew essentially by word of e-mouth. [23] Sony purchased and supported it, presumably because it was selling hardware and software. But with this example before them, Sony has gone on to develop "Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided" at an initial cost of 50.00 for software and monthly subscriptions of 15.00 per month. [24] Other entertainment giants such as Disney are preparing their own on-line offerings.

While video games seem to promise a considerable impact on our cultural life, their economic potential seems equally staggering. Sony maintains that it has yet to break even on its investments in Everquest but the whole issue of what constitutes permissible accounting practices in an industry whose income is largely from subscriptions to digital content is quite complicated. In July the Securities and Exchange Commission sought information from a number of such companies on their practices vis-à-vis sales and returns of the initial gaming packages. [25]

An additional profit to be gained from gaming is that creating games now employs a great many highly talented programmers and designers. Be sure to read Chris Pruett's article on creating a game for Disney in this issue of *Interface*. Chris was webmaster at the Matsushita Center for Electronic Learning at Pacific University for several years.

.08. **GAMING AND PLAY** ([return to index](#))

This may seem almost a redundant element of video gaming. If video games are not play, then what are they? But in our culture, one in which we often spend long hours with our only source of entertainment the very same machine that otherwise facilitates our work, play is not to be ignored. As Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) [26] observed, mankind is truly *Homo Ludens*, the animal that plays. And if playing were not so important in our contemporary culture, we would not, after all, have been discussing this particular topic!

.09. **CONCLUSION** ([return to index](#))

The impacts of video gaming are many, and most are controversial. It is apparent that gaming has great promise for positive uses, but also many threatening aspects as well. We increasingly will be making public choices to regulate or tax online activities, including gaming as play and gaming as gambling, and it is important to be an informed participant. The other alternative, of course, is to leave such policy choices to the various affected interest groups. For me, it has been important to play games as well as to read about them, in order to understand the nature of the prospects and problems that they will present.

Moreover, as a parent and as a teacher, I think it particularly important for teachers and parents to occasionally play some of the games that their children or students are playing. The games are having a powerful impact, both upon individual players and upon the culture, and it is important that we understand them.

Jeffrey Barlow
Editor, *Interface*

.10. **Footnotes** ([return to index](#))

[1] See Kent, Steven L. *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, Prima Publishing, 2001. P. 11. The Ultimate History ... is reviewed in this issue.

[2] For Myth-related sites see: <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&ie=ISO-8859-1&q=myth+computer+game&btnG=Google+Search>

[3] <http://www.civ3.com/> For a good article on using Civilization in the classroom, see Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire, *Applied Game Theory*, "Understanding Civilization III" in *Computer Games*, September 2003. p. 92.

[4] A methodology formally called "Counter Factual History" It is usually restricted to attempts to prove that really, the South did win the War of Northern Aggression.

[5] <http://www.ea.com/moh/airborne/index.jsp?ncc=1> The appeal of these games is, of course, their increasing realism. While any veteran is going to be properly skeptical of such attempts at virtual war, they are continually coming closer. Dale Dye, the noted military advisor to many films such as "Platoon" and *Saving Private Ryan* signed on to do "Battle Tactics with Captain Dale Dye" for the massive Electronic Arts game site found at: <http://www.ea.com/official/moh/alliedassault/us/strategy/daledye.jsp>

[6] <http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/lsd/doors.htm>

[7] See J. Bradford DeLong, "Seoul of a New Machine" in *Wired*, September 2003. p. 83.

[8] I note that there is even a Midwestern "LAN Party Coalition" which announces that: "*The mission of the LAN Party Coalition is to support the proliferation of LAN and online based gaming in the Midwest.*" <http://www.lanpartycoalition.com/>

[9] <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/10/10/1034061260831.html>

[10] See Roy Mark, "Illegal Internet Gambling Thriving" *ecommerce-guide.com*. http://ecommerce.internet.com/news/news/article/0,,10375_2114311,00.html

[11] See Roy Marks, "Bad Bet? Congress Wants to Regulate Web Wagering" *dc.Internet.Com* <http://dc.internet.com/news/article.php/2168531>

[12] See Brian Krebs, "U.S. Internet Gambling Crackdown Sparks WTO Complaint." *Washingtonost.com*, July 21, 2003,

[13] See the Harvard Medical school site on compulsive gambling "The Wager" at <http://www.thewager.org/> See especially "Netizens @ Risk: Online Gambling and Addiction" in Volume 7,number 15—April 10, 2002.

[14] This is an extremely controversial area, and one best left to professionals to understand. A few studies arguing against a causal relationship between gaming and violence are found at: http://www.gamezero.com/team-0/articles/features/violence_92/ "Violence and Video Games". A Japanese study positing a link can be found at: <http://mdn.mainichi.co.jp/news/archive/200308/30/20030830p2a00m0dm011000c.html> "Video Games Affirm Violence Among Kids: Study. *Mainichi Daily News*. See another such reference "The Link Between Video Games and Violence" *TechTV news*, April 26, 2000, at: <http://www.techtv.com/news/story/0,24195,2555386,00.html>

[15] See Robert Lemos "Violent games, shootings connected?" *ZDNet News* April 21, 1999, 5:00 PM PT. http://zdnet.com.com/2100-11_2-514429.html

[16] See "Video Games May Lead to Better Health Through New NASA Technology. http://oea.larc.nasa.gov/news_rels/2000/00-063.html

[17] Matt Slagle. "War Games Marching Closer to Reality" *The Oregonian*, October 6, 2003, D1-2. D 2.

[18] See "Video Games 'good for you'" *BBC News*, May 28, 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/2943280.stm>

[19] See, for example, Ronald Smith, "Successfully Incorporating Internet Content and Advanced Presentation Technology into Collegiate Courses: Lessons, Methodology, and Demonstration" in *Interface* at <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2002/11/smith.php>

[20] See The Buddhist Palace at <http://mcel.pacificu.edu/mcel/omm/> To enter the actual gaming site requires installing a particular plug-in to one's browser and downloading an application, skills unfortunately beyond many, and the limiting factor in this particular example of a game-related educational environment.

[21] I note that there is even a Midwestern "LAN Party Coalition" which announces that: "*The mission of the LAN Party Coalition is to support the proliferation of LAN and online based gaming in the Midwest.*" <http://www.lanpartycoalition.com/>

[22] See Leslie Walker, "Game Worlds in Creation" *Washington Post.com* July 26, 2003. EO 1. For archives see: [http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_product=WP&p_theme=wpost&p_action=search&p_maxdocs=200&s_dispstring=headline\(game\)%20and%20headline\(worlds\)%20and%20headline\(creation\)%20AND%20date\(06.0=YMD_date&p_params_date-0=date:B,E&p_text_date-0=06/01/2003%20to%2006/31/2003&p_field_advanced-0=title&p_text_advanced-0=\(%20game\)%20and%20\(%20worlds\)%20and%20\(%20creation\)&p_perpage=10&p_sort=YMD_date:D&xcal_useweights=no](http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_product=WP&p_theme=wpost&p_action=search&p_maxdocs=200&s_dispstring=headline(game)%20and%20headline(worlds)%20and%20headline(creation)%20AND%20date(06.0=YMD_date&p_params_date-0=date:B,E&p_text_date-0=06/01/2003%20to%2006/31/2003&p_field_advanced-0=title&p_text_advanced-0=(%20game)%20and%20(%20worlds)%20and%20(%20creation)&p_perpage=10&p_sort=YMD_date:D&xcal_useweights=no)

[23] A Goggle search on *Everquest* turned up more than 1,400,00 hits, an index of its virtual ubiquity. October 11, 2003

[24] For an amusing first person player's report, see Tom Chick, "My Life As A Wookie," *Computer Games*, September 2003. p. 100.

[25] Mike Musgrove, "Fourth Game Publisher Discloses SEC Inquiry" *Washingtonpost.com* July 22, 2003, page EO2.

[26] See the Huizinga Instituut homepage at: <http://cf.hum.uva.nl/~huizinga/>

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